DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 423 315 TM 029 228

TITLE	Annual Report of the Regional Educational Laboratories, 1997. Moving Research to Practice in America's Schools.
INSTITUTION	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	RJ96006001
PUB DATE	1998-00-00
NOTE	24p.; For the 1997 performance report, see TM 029 229.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Annual Reports; Cooperation; *Educational Change; Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; Federal Government; *Information Dissemination; *Networks; *Partnerships in Education; Program Descriptions; Program Effectiveness; *Research and Development
IDENTIFIERS	Office of Educational Research and Improvement; *Reform Efforts; *Regional Educational Laboratories

ABSTRACT

The network of 10 Regional Educational Laboratories works to ensure that those involved in educational improvement at the local, state, and regional levels have access to the best available information from research and practice. This report highlights major 1997 accomplishments of the Regional Educational Laboratory Program supported by contracts with the U.S. Department of Education, administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement. Laboratory efforts concentrate on three major areas: (1) creating new knowledge by engaging partner schools and agencies in collaborative field development and gap-filling research; (2) linking schools with each other and the larger community and helping educators become networked; and (3) providing information and direct assistance that school teams need during the change process. Brief descriptions are given of programs in the areas of development and applied research, strategic alliances and partnerships, and services and dissemination. In 1997, the Laboratories worked closely with 478 field development sires all over the country and cooperated in 54 development and applied research initiatives. The Laboratories also initiated 99 different alliances and participated in 46 joint ventures for education reform. In addition, in 1997, the Laboratories disseminated 1,783 different products and provided 1,213 different services. There were 11.8 million hits on Laboratory Internet Web sites. A sketch of each laboratory and its specialty area is provided. (SLD)

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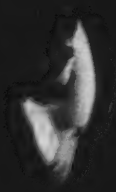
MOVING RESEARCH TO PRACTICE IN AMERICA'S SCHOOLS



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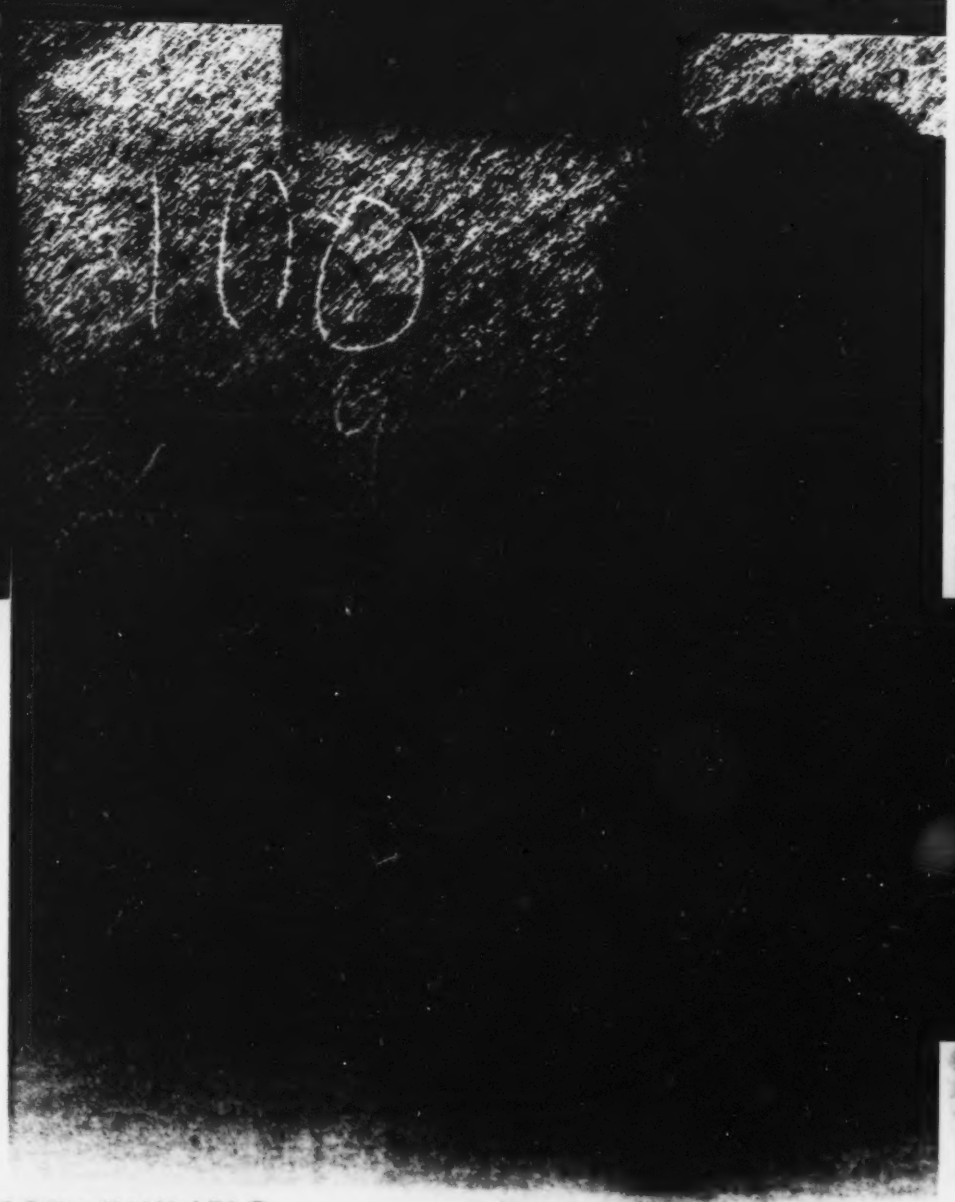
REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL LABORATORIES:

vital partners with state and local educators, community members, and policymakers in using research to tackle the difficult issues of education reform and improvement.

The network of 10 Regional Educational Laboratories works to ensure that those involved in educational improvement at the local, state, and regional levels have access to the best available information from research and practice.

This report highlights major 1997 accomplishments of the Regional Educational Laboratory Program supported by contracts with the U.S. Department of Education, administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI).

One hundred years ago American education was transforming itself to cope with a world of drastic change: the rise of a new industrial culture, waves of immigration that nearly doubled the population, and the great shift from agrarian to urban life. Today, as we again near the turn of a century, education's challenge may be even greater.



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TRANSFORMING SCHOOLS CALLS FOR COMPREHENSIVE CHANGE IN LONG-STANDING NORMS AND BELIEFS ABOUT THE ROLE OF TEACHERS AND HOW LEARNING IS STRUCTURED.

Today's society has little room for those who cannot read, write, and compute proficiently; find and use resources; frame and solve problems; and continually learn new technologies and skills. Unlike most other major industrialized nations, America is committed to creating a school system in which all children, not just the gifted or privileged few, can achieve at the highest academic level.

The task requires transforming the past century's industrial model of schooling—in which teachers lecture and students memorize, tracking systems sort children by ability and background, and bells punctuate rigidly set learning periods. It calls for comprehensive, rather than piecemeal, change in long-standing norms and beliefs about the role of teachers and how learning is structured, about grading practices, and about how resources are allocated.

For many schools it means finding ways to overcome learning barriers that reach beyond the classroom—the effects of changing family structures, escalating child poverty, increased violence and drugs, and student apathy and alienation. Schools also must increasingly address profound changes in the classroom's array of languages and cultural backgrounds. No society in history has expected so much of its schools.

Schools Can't Do It Alone

More than a decade of educational ferment has taught us much about reform itself. One universal lesson is that there are no magical short-term remedies. Proven success in one path-finding school does not move easily to another. Change is complex. It happens school by school and community by community, and it takes hard work. It takes time to galvanize commitment and resources, to absorb new "mental models" and professional skills, and to risk setbacks and go the extra mile.

The Regional Educational Laboratories support schools as they tackle this complex, risky, and time consuming challenge. Highly experienced as agents of change and experts in educational research and development, the Regional Laboratories are uniquely positioned for their pivotal role of working with schools, districts, and state departments of education in promoting comprehensive school reform.

The Laboratories help educators master the same "new basics" they are expected to teach the students—acquiring and analyzing information, and applying new knowledge to solve real problems. While fostering better ways to engage students in active learning, or helping teachers deepen their conceptual understanding in areas like math and science, our purpose is not just to improve discrete instructional skills or to find ways to provide six workshops instead of one. The purpose is to help schools themselves become learning communities.

Traditionally, few schools were structured to encourage teachers to think in terms of shared problems or broader organizational goals. The Laboratories work with school teams to transcend the traditional egg-crate structure of autonomous, isolated classrooms, refocusing professional learning from the occasional workshop to contextualized, ongoing organizational learning based on reflection, collaboration, and joint action.

The Laboratories address national concerns in ways that respond to the unique conditions and priorities of their regions. Governed by a board of directors representing local stakeholders—educators, business leaders, state officials, and community members—each Laboratory's program of work is shaped by the pressing school concerns, social issues, opportunities, and constraints of its particular region.

At its core, the work of the Laboratories is about transforming knowledge into the real building blocks of school reform. That means making sure school improvement efforts are grounded in the latest and best research and proven practice. It also means devising strategies for "scaling up" reform—taking instructional programs proven to be successful in one context and helping schools in different parts of the country adapt and reinvent them to fit their local histories and particular circumstances.

The Laboratories support schools as they tackle the complex, risky, and time-consuming challenges of reform.

MANY SCHOOLS MUST FIND WAYS TO OVERCOME LEARNING BARRIERS THAT REACH BEYOND THE CLASSROOM.

Laboratory efforts concentrate on three major areas:

- Creating new knowledge—better tools and strategies for improving professional and organizational practice—by engaging partner schools and agencies in collaborative field development and gap-filling research
- Linking schools with each other and the larger community, forging strategic alliances, and helping educators become networked in ways that overcome isolation, pool talents and resources, and foster continuous learning
- Providing information and direct assistance—in vision building and planning, professional development, coaching, and ongoing support—that school teams need during the long process of changing schools

Creating New Educational Methods and Resources

Like industry and medicine, education depends on sound research and development for advances. R&D talent, risk taking, and persistence are hallmarks of Laboratory success in developing powerful new approaches educators use to improve teaching and learning. Schools across the country today are boosting student performance through research-based programs pioneered by the Laboratories. For example:

- Mid-continent Laboratory's Dimensions of Learning, designed to help educators increase their understanding of the learning process, encompasses five critical components—maintaining positive attitudes, acquiring and integrating knowledge, expanding and refining knowledge, using knowledge meaningfully, and developing productive habits of mind.
- Northwest Laboratory's Onward to Excellence, a structured process for making reform happen, has helped more than 2,000 school teams, trained in a series of intensive workshops spread over two years, use their student-performance data to implement schoolwide improvement.
- Appalachia Laboratory's QUILT, a year-long school-based program that incorporates training, modeling, practice, and peer feedback, gives teachers a modern-day take on the Socratic method as a way to stimulate student thinking.
- Southwest Laboratory's work in strengthening science partnerships moves outside the traditional walls for teaching science. Through innovative partnerships among schools, museums, and universities, teachers are trained to use the natural world in hands-on science instruction.
- Six Laboratories, led by the Laboratory for Student Success, are conducting a study of effective Title I schoolwide program schools in areas across the country.
- WestEd's Program for Infant/Toddler Caregivers, a comprehensive set of broadcast-quality videos, curriculum guides, and training manuals that teaches caregivers how to provide children with nurturing and educationally stimulating environments, has been adopted by seven states.

At its core, the work of the Laboratories is about transforming knowledge into the real building blocks of school reform.

SCHOOLS MUST ADDRESS PROFOUND CHANGES IN THE CLASSROOM'S ARRAY OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS.

The potency of such innovations results from indepth collaborative work with teams of classroom teachers and school and community leaders. While the name "laboratory" denotes the creative, disciplined experimentation it takes to move research into practice, the real laboratory we work in encompasses busy classrooms and district central offices and stretches across state boundaries.

Field-based development engages educational practitioners as active partners in the design and refinement of new programs—much as innovators in business involve the customer as a participant in the creation of value. Whether adopting an exemplary school program or launching a far-reaching statewide initiative for low-performing schools, our client-partners, from classrooms to state departments, rely on the skills of research and development professionals in the Regional Laboratories who approach their work using a combination of research results and proven practices.

Forging Alliances, Networks, and Partnerships

In the politically charged arena of school reform, the Laboratories have earned trust through their objective advocacy of what's best for children. Practitioners and policymakers alike perceive the Laboratories as credible sources of unbiased information on complex or controversial questions. Seen as knowledgeable yet impartial, the Laboratories are able to span turf or organizational boundaries, bringing together people who might otherwise be working independently or in isolation and helping build consensus and provide mutual support in tackling tough issues.

While perhaps least visible, the role of developing, facilitating, and enhancing all types of networks, alliances, and partnerships is one of the most indispensable functions that the Laboratories perform. The Laboratories play a range of roles, including initiation, information provision, product development, and convening functions. Examples include:

- A Laboratory-initiated network of school superintendents and college of education faculty to stimulate programmatic changes to improve the quality of teachers
- A Laboratory-initiated regional network of state education agency policy analysts and advisors to provide a forum to respond to the need for educational policy and research information
- A Laboratory-sponsored initiative that brings together stakeholders to address the needs of families with school-age children through more effective access to health and human services
- A Laboratory dissemination and information exchange for a network of 100 teachers, researchers, and administrators focusing on rural school improvement
- A Laboratory role as information provider for a cluster of 15 schools in an urban district working to develop and implement reform initiatives

Providing New Knowledge and Assistance

Schools today are hungry for research-based knowledge, quite unlike times past when the image of research often carried an "ivory tower" taint. This is evident in the questions that besiege Laboratory staff by phone and e-mail, and in person at school sites and Laboratory conferences and workshops—from teachers eager to know what research says about managing class time or the effects of cooperative learning; from principals grappling with the pros and cons of student assessment portfolios or new approaches to site-based management; from district superintendents seeking better ways to involve parents or strategies for preventing violence; and from governors' aides who need the latest findings about trade-offs regarding charter schools or class-size reduction to frame new legislation.

Highly experienced as agents of change and experts in educational R&D, the Laboratories are uniquely positioned to work with schools, districts, and state departments.

CHANGE IS COMPLEX: IT HAPPENS SCHOOL BY SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY BY COMMUNITY.

Busy school practitioners and policymakers don't have the time or the means to dig through the mounting store of knowledge generated by research and innovative practice. They rely on the Regional Laboratories to winnow and weigh, to pull together, and—most important—to translate needed information into timely, accessible formats they can use.

The Laboratories respond through a mix of communication strategies. These range from highly readable print publications—knowledge briefs, guides, classroom resource handbooks, targeted newsletters—to seminars and forums, to electronic "dialogue" networks using the Internet, fax and Voice-On-Demand, video conferencing, CD-ROMs, and other technologies.

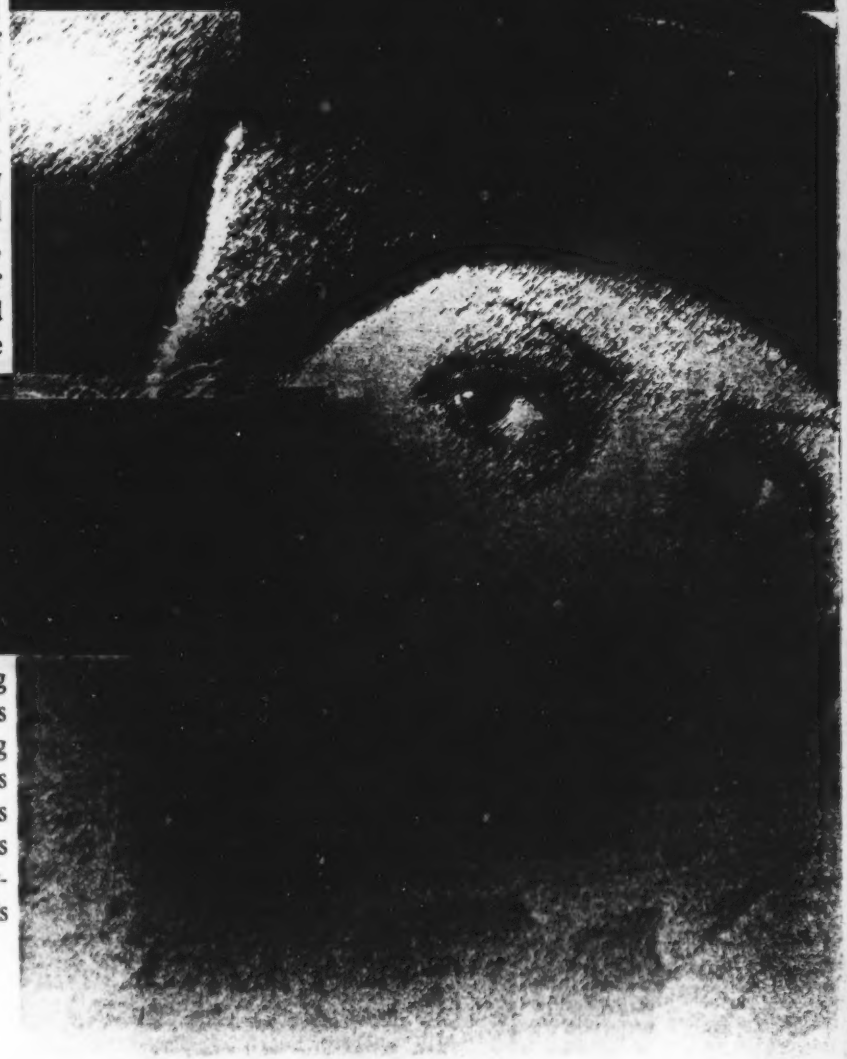
Whether sharing needed knowledge through print and electronic media, or through onsite consultation and technical assistance, the aim is not to expose practitioners to a smattering of new ideas, but to structure the information and target its flow for use in solving real problems. For example:

- The North Central Laboratory's Pathways to School Improvement is an Internet navigation tool that helps educators access reliable, research-based information, tailored to their school improvement needs, through hypertext files, graphics, videoclips, audio comments, and databases.
- The Laboratory for Student Success cosponsored several major invitational conferences on emerging and pressing urban education reform issues.
- A CD-ROM on Pacific Resources for Education and Learning's (PREL) work of matching math and science standards with teaching standards assisted entities in the Pacific region.
- SouthEastern Regional Vision for Education's (SERVE) convening of legislative-researchers, state education agency legislative liaisons, and governors' aides resulted in a Southeast policy communication network.
- The Northeast and Islands Regional Laboratory (LAB at Brown University) made significant contributions to the Rhode Island Department of Education in *Information Works!*, its assembly of quality information about schools and students for use in improving teaching and learning.

The Laboratories address national concerns in ways that respond to unique conditions and priorities in their regions.

Brief stories on the following pages illustrate how the work of the Laboratories is making a difference in aiding school reform by developing powerful new approaches, creating alliances that leverage talent and resources, and providing direct assistance and timely information to schools, communities, and states.

DEVELOPMENT AND APPLIED RESEARCH: CREATING MORE EFFECTIVE EDUCATIONAL METHODS AND RESOURCES



ducators committed to schoolwide change need new strategies and better tools for putting the pieces of reform together. They also need the answers that effective applied research provides about what works and why. n 1997 the Laboratories worked closely with 478 field development sites all over the country—schools, districts, and state education and other agencies. Development and applied research activities were conducted at these sites to test, refine, and ready new methods and practices for dissemination. The 54 development and applied research initiatives under way with these partner sites include:

Elementary and secondary schoolwide comprehensive reforms

Districtwide comprehensive reforms involving multiple strategies and target audiences

Community-based reforms focusing on public engagement and partnerships

Urban school and district improvement projects

Bilingual teacher education projects

Statewide and regionwide capacity-building models

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SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES ARE IDENTIFIED IN KENTUCKY SCHOOLS THAT IMPROVE STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS.

Any parent who has tried to assemble a bicycle under holiday deadline pressure appreciates the value of easy-to-follow instructions, which tend to be rare. Yet one Kentucky high school student recently wrote step-by-step instructions for changing a tractor bearing that were so precise they were posted in the barn, where workers on the family farm consult them frequently.

Whether they realize it or not, these workers are benefiting from an ambitious school reform effort that emphasizes student writing.

Two years ago, a team of researchers set out to identify attitudes and conditions that nurture such learning. So far, team members from the Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL) and the Kentucky Department of Education have interviewed more than 100 teachers, 200 randomly selected students, and 50 administrators in 25 Kentucky schools. Some of these schools have been more successful than others in helping students improve their writing portfolio scores on the state assessment.

Preliminary findings show that teachers in the more successful schools received vigorous support from school and district administrators and focused their students on writing for its own sake rather than writing to produce perfect portfolios. Their students do many different kinds of writing across the curriculum, both to enhance learning and to communicate.

Their students also are likely familiar with all five stages of the writing process: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Teachers often encourage students to consult with them or with one another about their work. One fourth-grade student reported that she taught her mother what types of questions to ask and what types of questions or suggestions to avoid when giving feedback about her writing.

Kentucky established large-scale, performance-based assessments in its reform law enacted in 1990. Writing portfolios are assessed in grades four, seven, and 12. The assessment is scored on a four-tiered scale: novice, apprentice, proficient, and distinguished. Students submit creative and reflective pieces and "real-world" writing such as editorials, business letters, and reports.

When the Kentucky legislature debated changing assessment and accountability programs in early 1998, the study team was able to provide state-specific, research-based information. "But what we're really excited about," says state writing staff member Claudia Runge, "is what is coming out of this long-term project—something helpful for teachers and schools and students." Early research findings are helping educators learn from successful colleagues about ways to improve their writing instruction. Department staff are also using the information to evaluate and plan professional development offerings. Says Runge, "We've learned about research, and we've learned about schools. It's been really good for us to...talk to students and teachers."

Who may benefit from this collaborative effort? Teachers who receive targeted professional development, their students, and—just maybe—late-night bicycle assemblers lucky enough to have instructions written by a Kentucky high school graduate.

AEL

AEL/Kentucky researchers use study findings to incorporate the wisdom from practice into efforts to improve writing instruction.

PATTERN OF CONTINUED DECLINE IN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IS REVERSED IN URBAN SCHOOLS.

What a difference just months can make in the learning life of a child or, as in this case, an entire school.

Walker-Jones Elementary School was one of the lowest performing schools in Washington, D.C., in 1997. Walker-Jones, along with four other low-performing schools, began implementation of the Laboratory for Student Success' (LSS) Community for Learning (CFL) during the 1997-98 school year. The school has since climbed in district elementary school rankings from third from the bottom in reading achievement to 46th place. Once only a step away from dead last in math scores, the school has advanced to a remarkable 24th place.

The accomplishments of the Walker-Jones students and staff, as well as the other urban and rural schools with a high concentration of students from economically disadvantaged families, demonstrate that positive changes can take place in significant ways, even during the first year of program implementation. This is a major finding from LSS' program of development and applied research aimed at developing a procedural knowledge base on strategies for scaling up implementation of research-based innovations that work in urban school reform efforts. A follow-up study was conducted of high school students who participated in CFL while attending Stetson Middle School in Philadelphia. Findings showed that almost twice the number of students who participated in CFL in middle school performed at grade level in 11th grade when compared to those who did not participate in CFL. Similar sustained improvements in student achievement were observed in the Eighth Avenue Elementary School in Houston, Texas, where fewer than 25 percent of students passed the state accountability measure prior to CFL implementation. All students in the school passed the state accountability measure after three years of program implementation.

The CFL program is a comprehensive approach to school reform that draws from more than two decades of research and school applications. CFL was developed and field tested at the National Center on Education in the Inner Cities, one of the national R&D centers originally established with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI). CFL is one of the 17 research-based comprehensive school reform models cited in the recent federal Comprehensive School Reform legislation. These and other school reform models are increasingly in wide dissemination across the nation, with descriptions available on the Internet. LSS, along with other developers, is providing information and implementation services to schools that want to use the model.

CFL's major design premise is that a community cannot claim progress until its children and youth are well served, show healthy development, and have steady, sustained advances in school achievement. Schools must remain the primary focus of efforts to improve our nation's capacity for education. CFL recognizes, however, that significant learning also occurs outside the school, in the home, and in the community. Thus CFL implementation builds on the strengths of the community by tapping into its diversity and redeploying its resources. Program implementation is supported by a delivery system that builds on and strengthens the improvement plans of individual schools, linking the work of schools with all other learning environments—including the home, libraries, museums, the workplace, and other community educational and cultural institutions—to create a community for learning.

At the core of CFL's success in turning patterns of continuous downward achievement into positive results is the LSS capacity-building process, which develops an ongoing system of school-based professional development and technical assistance to support implementation of the individual school staff. LSS helps school districts establish a peer facilitating-coaching approach to professional development that provides continuous assistance in meeting the implementation needs of individual teachers. As noted by Cassandra Wallace, a teacher in the District of Columbia School District, "This is an excellent model for new teachers. It helps them get oriented. For me, too. I've been teaching for 29 years, and the diagnostic-prescriptive process solved my problems." And Melissa Silva-Stehr, who teaches in the Philadelphia School District, notes, "We're reinforcing lessons and we're building resilience in our students."

One of the biggest problems in keeping qualified teaching staff in this nation's poorest and most challenged schools is the stigma of student failure and low teacher morale. Not to be forgotten are findings that show that CFL results in an increased sense of accomplishment and pride among teachers and principals.

USE OF TEACHER EVALUATION MODEL RESULTS IN MORE MOTIVATED, SKILLED, AND COLLEGIAL TEACHERS.

Nothing builds parent confidence in public education more than learning that a seasoned, expert teacher is at the helm of their child's classroom. So teachers across the southeastern United States are excited when they report that using a new form of teacher evaluation has made them more motivated, given them more focus in their daily work, heightened their professionalism, and enhanced the feeling of collegiality in their schools. A teacher in Richland School District Two in South Carolina remarked, "Now I constantly think of how I can do things better in my classroom."

The strong belief of the South-Eastern Regional Vision for Education (SERVE) that it is vital to focus on retaining and supporting experienced teachers led the Regional Laboratory to embark on the development of a formative teacher evaluation (FTE) model that supports educators in their continued growth and learning.

Most teacher evaluation is summative; that is, it calls for teachers to be observed and rated on a performance instrument that is the same for all teachers. Many teachers and administrators report that this rating process is not helpful for growth. But the formative evaluation process calls for the teacher to reflect on strengths and weaknesses and use peers to get feedback on progress made towards goals of professional growth and improved teaching skills.

SERVE began by conducting a study of the FTE model with three school districts: Guilford County, North Carolina; Richland School District Two, South Carolina; and Surry County, North Carolina. Educator teams from these districts were trained to implement an FTE model in at least one school in their district. In 1997 more than 20 school districts in Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina were involved in formative teacher evaluation plans that emphasize one of five elements: goal setting, menu of options, combined goal setting/menu of options, panel review, and peer coaching.

A Watauga County, North Carolina, principal, reflecting on the improved atmosphere of collegiality in his school, stated, "Teachers participated together throughout the whole year. They took their goals seriously and really grew together."

The formative evaluation process encourages teachers to present a stronger and more varied instructional program that improves student achievement. For example, a Watauga County administrator reported improved writing scores for all seventh-graders, with "98 percent of the students on or above grade level, and 88 percent above grade level, in state assessments" since formative teacher evaluation was introduced.

A teacher in Guilford County said, "We would survive on the summative evaluation process, but it didn't help us to become better teachers." Formative teacher evaluation programs are valuable because the self-driven feedback process enhances professionalism, fosters collegiality among peers, and strengthens teaching skills. A Watauga County principal summarized the contribution of the formative system: "The summative system was not enough for our teachers. Formative evaluation is growth oriented."

Besides offering introductory formative teacher evaluation, peer coaching, mentoring, and teacher portfolio workshops, SERVE holds annual networking conferences in Mississippi and North Carolina for involved and interested schools and districts.

SERVE

SERVE's study of a more effective model for teacher evaluation is showing positive results in 20 districts across the southeastern United States.

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STRATEGIC ALLIANCES AND PARTNERSHIPS: BRINGING TOGETHER PRACTITIONERS, SERVICE PROVIDERS, AND POLICYMAKERS

The hard work of remaking schools requires both ongoing support and the dynamic exchange of ideas and information that comes with collaboration: teachers working together in teams; school teams working with other schools, districts, and support providers; and educators working with community organizations. aboratories create and support strategic alliances, partnerships, networks, and joint ventures in ways that mobilize the talents and resources of different groups.

n 1997 the Laboratories:

Provided information, convened, handled logistics, developed products, or initiated 99 different alliances focused primarily on state and local reform Participated in 46 joint ventures with other organizations and agencies on topics of curriculum and instruction, rural education, school change processes, technology, assessment, urban education, early childhood education, and language and cultural diversity

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ALASKA VILLAGES SEE RESULTS FOR THEIR YOUNG PEOPLE.

For the first time in many Alaska villages, schools and communities have begun a process to raise academic standards and to jointly agree on the future of education for their young people. The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's (NWREL) program Alaska Onward to Excellence (AOTE) has been pivotal in providing a process for this critical dialogue to occur, so that the historical rift between schools and communities can be mended. It is resulting in improved student performance, community ownership of the schools, integration of native culture into the curriculum, and greatly enhanced educational opportunities for village students.

The AOTE program is a powerful combination of district, school, and community engagement in improving educational results for students. It is designed to solicit meaningful involvement from elders, parents, community members, students, and district staff to set direction, plan and take action, and continuously renew this joint venture to see that all students can prosper, both in their native cultures and outside their villages.

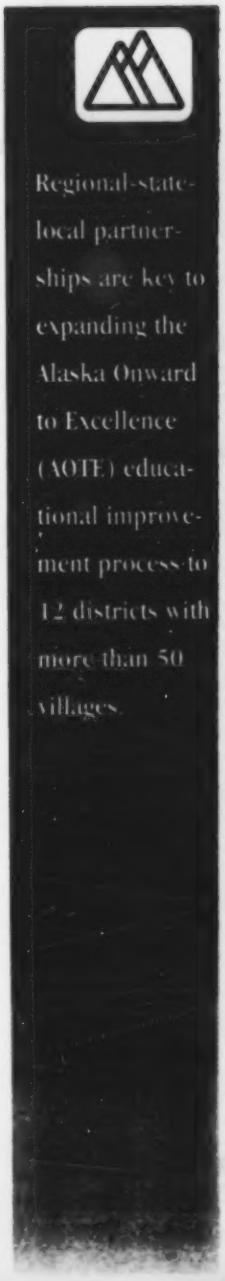
With firm commitment and participation from their regional boards and strong superintendent leadership, some districts are seeing positive results. For example, the Southwest Region School District has seen a "renaissance in expectations of kids," according to Superintendent Don Evans. This district, through its work with AOTE, has made traditional cultural knowledge a centerpiece for learning, sent more kids on to college and postsecondary training, helped more students attain grade-level performance, and created partnerships with its communities in mutual support of learning.

The Chugach School District has completely restructured its education program. Local communities set goals that focused on preparing students to live and work either in their home villages or in Western culture. As a result, the district has shifted to a performance-based learning system, has started highly innovative school-to-work programs, and is holding students responsible for higher standards.

Partnerships are the key to scaling up AOTE. An alliance between NWREL, the Alaska Staff Development Network, several school districts, the Alaska Comprehensive Assistance Center (AKRAC), the University of Alaska, and the Alaska Department of Education was formed to expand AOTE from two districts in 1991 to 12 districts with more than 50 villages today.

Since NWREL and AKRAC formed a partnership in 1996 to develop trainer capacity in Alaska, AKRAC staff have co-trained under the tutelage of experienced NWREL trainers and have become certified to deliver AOTE training in new sites across Alaska. The training process, which relies on training local facilitators to carry the process to their villages, continues to be adjusted so that the likelihood of successful implementation is high. In addition, partner researchers from NWREL, the University of Alaska at Fairbanks, and nine AOTE villages are compiling detailed case studies to more carefully assess what AOTE has accomplished across the state.

Over the years, NWREL has worked with its partners in Alaska to adapt AOTE to the needs of villages and districts. In 1997 this work continued with further NWREL-AKRAC training of new sites and data collection in the AOTE case study. The success of scaling up AOTE lies in the strength of these strategic partnerships in Alaska to leverage change for remote schools, local communities, and tomorrow's young adults.



Regional-state-local partnerships are key to expanding the Alaska Onward to Excellence (AOTE) educational improvement process to 12 districts with more than 50 villages.

EBEYE SCHOOL'S SUCCESSFUL TRANSFORMATION IS A FIRST-OF-ITS-KIND EFFORT IN THE MARSHALL ISLANDS.

The problems at Ebeye Public School in the Republic of the Marshall Islands were legion: leaky roofs, broken windows, exposed electrical wiring, damaged classroom flooring, no running water, nonworking bathrooms, and missing steps in the stairwell. Furniture and supplies were scarce, school policy enforcement was lacking, and the community had limited expectations of the school and its staff. Add to that a poorly planned curriculum, inadequate teaching methods, and a disappearing native language. The bottom line: fifth-graders were barely able to write complete sentences in English, with fewer than half of them graduating; eighth-grade students were unable to pass the national high school entrance test; and overall student achievement was low.

"It was obvious that Ebeye Public School needed help badly," says Evelyn Joseph, who coordinates staff development at the Ministry of Education. "A different approach to school improvement was in order."

Thus, in January 1997, Project Al Maron was born. In Marshallese, "al maron" means community members coming together to work on a canoe, house, or other project. In this spirit, Kwajalein Atoll Local Government (KALGOV) and the Ebeye Public School Board of Education invited Pacific Resources for Education and Learning (PREL) to become a key partner in the transformation of Ebeye Public School. Other critical players included the school staff, parents, students, and community members; the mayor, city manager, and Public Works Department of Ebeye; U.S. Army Kwajalein Atoll (USAKA) personnel; the Australian Embassy; Kwajalein Atoll Relief Effort (KARE); and local agencies.

Based on the principles of strategic alliance and partnership, Project Al Maron is a first-of-its-kind effort toward improving education in the Marshall Islands of the Pacific and returning the community to its traditional cultural approach to education, where everyone has a critical role to play.

As a first step, all key partners met to develop a three-year school improvement plan, clarify roles and responsibilities, and identify available resources and agencies as potential contributors. Other team activities included preparing an assessment report; arranging training for school administrators and teachers; making extensive preparations for the school's opening; and conducting regular classroom observation. "This was the first time so many people and agencies came together to pay attention to the needs of Ebeye Public School," said Principal Edison Anjain. "It is all very encouraging."

Improvements in the facilities required the coordinated efforts of the Public Works Department, PREL, Kwajalein Review Efforts, parents, and the community. School leadership teams and staff committees are driving curriculum changes. Communication lines now connect the school staff with the Board of Education, the office of the City Manager, KALGOV, and the Public Works Department.

"It's had its rough moments," says Hilda Heine, PREL's liaison for the project. "But we are encouraged by the results: improved facilities and student learning environment, greater community involvement, and much more accountability. We all need to continue to work together. Change does take time."

The Al Maron project will continue through December 31, 2000. PREL's role is to provide training and technical assistance for school improvement; conduct needs assessments; assist in further development of the school improvement plan; and coordinate time and resource contributions to ensure that everyone plays an active role. Working in close collaboration with the Board of Education and KALGOV, PREL has established school improvement priorities in three major areas: leadership and governance, curriculum and instruction, and parent involvement.

PREL is a key partner, providing training and technical assistance, assessing needs, and furthering the school improvement plan.

AN AMBITIOUS HOME-SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP BOLSTERS ALBUQUERQUE SCHOOLS.

Principal Analee Maestas envisioned an ambitious home-school-community partnership to improve conditions in Albuquerque's low-income, predominantly Hispanic South Valley. She had launched a modest partnership at her school, Los Padillas Elementary, in 1992. And that program had worked, thanks in part to guidance she received from the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL).

So when Maestas wanted to apply what she'd learned in a more comprehensive partnership, she again turned to SEDL.

Her timing was flawless. SEDL staff were expanding a model for home-school-community partnerships they had field-tested at Los Padillas and several other schools. They called their new model the CAT, for Collaborative Action Team, and they were eager to put it into practice. SEDL signed on with the alliance, and by November 1996 the Rio Grande Human Services Collaborative opened its doors.

Throughout 1997 the collaborative grew to include 14 public schools, 40 social service providers and organizations, and many community supporters. It bolsters South Valley schools with a family education center at Los Padillas Elementary, an academic mentoring and counseling program at Polk Middle School, a medical clinic at Rio Grande High School, and other services.

Yet complexity can undo partnerships. Members may have conflicting goals, causing the group to lose focus and drift apart.

Maestas says SEDL's CAT model helped the Rio Grande Collaborative sidestep such issues; it contributed "a strategic way in which to plan, implement, and begin to evaluate the collaborative." SEDL staff also networked collaborative partners to CAT test sites in Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas so teams could swap experiences and help each other. Finally, Maestas says, SEDL's support was "critical, because we hadn't done this before. We needed to have the steps all laid out for us, and SEDL gave us that technical assistance."

New CAT director Catherine Fleming Jordan says SEDL benefited from the partnership, too. "We observed, analyzed, and documented collaborative activities, allowing us to polish the CAT model and assess its replicability. Now we're working to capture these findings in a published guide to CATs," Jordan says.

The guide will include descriptions of the group-planning and team-building skills that helped the Rio Grande Collaborative gel. "Without this, we would have really been struggling," says Vickie Otero, the collaborative's program coordinator. "They gave us the foundation and the building blocks so we can continue growing. And they helped us celebrate our successes."

What successes?

At Polk Middle School, more students who had been referred to an on-campus alternative school returned to mainstream classes rather than dropping out. Parents' attitudes about Polk have brightened. Surveyed parents indicate that they felt their children were safer at school, with good reason. Discipline referrals have gone down significantly, especially the suspensions.

Suspension rates at all 14 Rio Grande Collaborative schools are dropping, according to Principal Edward Soto. And Rio Grande High's dropout rate dipped from 18.92 percent in the 1994-95 school year to 14.87 percent in 1996-97.

At this point of success, SEDL is turning its facilitation role over to the collaborative membership. This will allow SEDL to focus on developing new CATs in new neighborhoods. After all, the CAT model promotes self-reliance, and Jordan and other SEDL specialists can see the collaborative will continue on its own. They also recognize something else: A vision, supplemented by committed partners and a research-based model for growth, can change a community.

SEDL

SEDL's Collaborative Action Team (CAT) helped sidestep such issues as conflicting goals and losing focus in establishing the highly effective Rio Grande Collaborative.

SERVICES AND DISSEMINATION: HELPING SCHOOLS SELECT, ADAPT, AND CONFIGURE ELEMENTS OF IMPROVEMENT

Real change doesn't come from outside schools, yet increasingly it requires outside help. It requires new understandings of what works and doesn't work, assistance in finding the right resources, and practical help in problem solving. hrough timely, accurate information distilled from research and practice, the Laboratories help policymakers—from governors and legislators to local school superintendents and board members—grapple with complex reform issues. Laboratory staff work closely with state departments of education to plan, carry out, and evaluate school improvement initiatives, and give direct, onsite support to reforming schools and districts.

n 1997 the Laboratories:

Disseminated 1,783 different products, including syntheses of research and craft knowledge, policy studies, descriptions of best practices, research reports, professional development materials, tools, and processes

Provided 1,213 different services, including training and capacity building, technical assistance, conferences, network support, and information searches

aboratory products were provided in print, electronic, audio, and video formats to 419,927 clients and via 11.8 million hits on Laboratory Internet Web sites. Laboratory services were delivered to 148,966 clients through a variety of strategies, including one-on-one contact, training events, conferences, and networks.

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ENRICHING FAMILY PARTICIPATION WILL STRENGTHEN NEW YORK CITY SCHOOLS.

"If we were all on shore and our children were out in the midst of a sinking vessel, would we get bogged down debating: 'Who's going to row? Who's going to have their hands on the wheel? What size ship should we have?' Instead, I want us together to craft the tools we need to achieve high-quality results for your children. I want us to get there." In these opening remarks at a retreat organized by the Northeast and Islands Regional Laboratory (LAB at Brown University), New York City Public Schools' Chancellor Rudolph Crew revealed his vision for family involvement to members of the Chancellor's Parents Advisory Council (CPAC).

Chancellor Crew's call to invigorate family involvement came as the result of an earlier call he made in July 1997, when he asked the LAB to help him strengthen the involvement of families because of his belief that families are "the single most important requirement in improving student achievement."

The LAB goal was to build a productive working relationship between the chancellor and CPAC, as it sought to help CPAC create both organizational structures and a strategic plan that would effectively support citywide family involvement in the New York City schools.

After holding intensive strategic planning meetings to define CPAC's role and set its work in motion, the LAB scheduled two follow-up retreats for the chancellor, his executive staff, and CPAC members. The first retreat examined how the New York City school budget supports instruction, and the second looked at the development of the New York City comprehensive education plan. Both retreats emphasized the central role of family involvement in school reform.

Working with LAB staff, CPAC adopted the following goals for reforming the role of families in New York City schools:

- To work as the chancellor's active and informed partner in promoting excellence in public education
- To encourage knowledgeable, meaningful parent participation by identifying information on the theory and practice of student-centered teaching and learning
- To promote effective models of family participation within the school community

One CPAC representative expressed the role of the LAB well: "Sometimes you need to have an outside person, someone to help you see a better view, get better ideas, find different ways of doing things. The LAB has also provided valuable information on educational concepts—such as the idea of the resilient child."

Once the CPAC strategic plan was complete and Chancellor Crew was satisfied with all that had been achieved, the LAB held its final scheduled meeting with CPAC. As the meeting ended, LAB staff noticed that none of the CPAC members were preparing to leave. Though the work had been accomplished, CPAC members weren't ready to end this valuable working relationship. A CPAC member suggested another meeting and wondered aloud whether that would be possible. After further discussion, the LAB and CPAC scheduled an additional meeting to begin the next stage of their work together.

Through its work with the Chancellor's Parents Advisory Council of the New York City Public Schools, the LAB is discovering innovative ways of helping urban families become important partners in school reform. What the LAB learns from its work in New York City will have significance for urban school reform initiatives across the country.

LAB

The Chancellor's Parents Advisory Council adopted goals for the role of families in New York City schools, using the LAB as a source of outside help, ideas, and planning assistance.

LOW-PERFORMING CHICAGO SCHOOLS ARE SEEING POSITIVE RESULTS.

Chicago: the City of Big Shoulders. Good thing, because Chicago has a heavy load to carry. Tucked into its backpack of urban challenges is a school district of some 550 schools and 425,000 students, many performing significantly below grade level. Most (80 percent) are from low-income households, and many (65 percent) are minorities.

State legislation has authorized the district superintendent to take a variety of actions with poorly performing schools, from offering additional resources to requiring massive reorganization. Under the district's new guidelines, low-performing schools pair up with external partners for assistance.

Late in 1995, the Office of Accountability of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) enlisted the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) to provide comprehensive assistance to eight elementary schools, including Crispus Attucks Academy. Fewer than 15 percent of Attucks students were achieving at or above grade level in math and reading when the school was placed on probation. Almost all of the school's 568 African American students live in subsidized housing, and all of them qualify for the free- and reduced-price breakfast and lunch program.

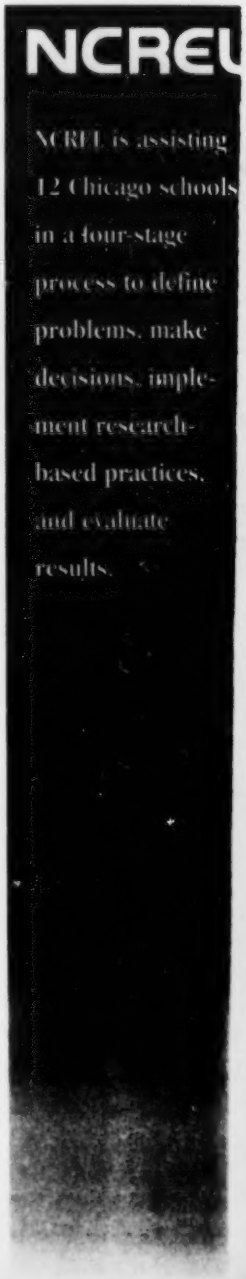
Drawing upon research and best practices in professional development, effective schools, and school improvement, NCREL is using a four-stage change process to help Chicago pinpoint where changes are needed, suggest proven research-based programs for consideration, provide onsite staff to support changes, and evaluate progress.

The four-stage process, widely used by major consulting firms in the private sector to improve organizational outcomes, is one NCREL has adapted for use in the public arena. Toward the dual goal of increased organizational effectiveness and improved student outcomes, NCREL is testing the degree to which the process can be adjusted for the politics and contexts of public education.

Reviewing student-performance data, Attucks Principal Noble Pearce discovered that students in first grade were already more than a year behind. "We were forever playing catch up," he recalls. "We were trying to remediate when we should have been in a preventive mode." To help improve skills in the early grades, NCREL researched programs that support comprehensive school reform and introduced the school to Robert Slavin's Success for All schoolwide reading model and the University of Chicago's Everyday Mathematics curriculum. Using research findings that tie parent involvement to student success, NCREL also helped Attucks create and staff a parent education center where parents learn how to assist children with homework and foster a home environment conducive to learning.

Are these changes making a difference at Attucks? For starters, school attendance is up and discipline problems are down. "We were suspending students every week before, and that doesn't happen any more," reports Pearce. He also saw improvement in 1997 student report cards, and the 80 percent graduation rate exceeded both the school's projection and the district standard.

By the end of 1997, four more Chicago schools had named NCREL as their external partner, bringing the total to 12. As the roster grows, so does NCREL's opportunity to study the approaches and strategies that have the most impact on changing instructional practice and improving student achievement. The knowledge base gained from this Chicago experience provides a valuable guide in determining how to meet field-based needs throughout the region, especially in other urban centers.


NCREL
NCREL is assisting 12 Chicago schools in a four-stage process to define problems, make decisions, implement research-based practices, and evaluate results.

McREL HELPS A RURAL WYOMING DISTRICT RETAIN ACCREDITATION.

"We are jumping for joy," Curriculum Coordinator Janice Peterson wrote recently in a message to Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory (McREL) Senior Associate Mike Arnold. It was welcome news, considering less than two years ago Peterson's district was operating under a cloud of accreditation uncertainty.

A 1996 review of Weston County School District 7 in Upton, Wyoming, downgraded the district's accreditation to "conditional" status. The 330-student district in northeast Wyoming was given its marching orders: Make substantial progress or risk losing state funding.

A year had passed without much progress when Arnold heard about the district's plight from Wyoming's Director of Federal Programs, Carol Mawford. He and McREL State Liaisons Ceri Dean and Gail Clark went to work with the district's newly hired Superintendent, Dwight Moose, and other district personnel, shoring up specific weaknesses identified by the state accreditation group.

In a recent review of their progress, Mawford recommended full accreditation status, prompting Peterson's jubilant message to McREL. Peterson praised McREL's approach, calling it much more personal and individualized than any assistance the district could have obtained by reading journals or attending large workshops.

"The hands-on expertise they offered was without equal," Moose agreed. He praised the three McREL state liaisons for working long hours and responding to the district's requests in a manner that was "above and beyond the call of duty."

In turn, Dean directed the praise back to district personnel, noting they did most of the work themselves after receiving initial guidance from McREL.

On the Friday before the start of the 1997-98 school year, Dean held an intensive, one-day workshop on aligning assessments with district standards. She based that workshop on an alternative assessment "toolkit" developed by a classroom assessment team drawn from the 10 Regional Laboratories. The toolkit has proven a boon to teachers across the country; its second edition was completed in 1997.

Dean and her colleagues have since returned to Upton several times to meet one-on-one with each teacher, reviewing his or her progress. She said that during this work district teachers achieved two main accomplishments: (1) gaining an understanding of the intent of their district's standards, and (2) matching their assessments with the standards' intent.

Despite the recent good news about accreditation, McREL's work in Upton is not complete. The Laboratory has designated the district as its Wyoming field-service site and is planning follow-up activities to evaluate results from end-of-course assessments. McREL is also assisting the district in implementing a plan to improve reading among its students.

Three Weston district teachers attended McREL's fall 1997 conference, Exploring Beliefs and Research to Promote Thoughtful Practice. One of those, high school English teacher Betty Strong, said the conference encouraged her to think above and beyond day-to-day teaching concerns. The district is consulting with McREL about pursuing additional professional development opportunities.

Praising the district's progress, Dean emphasized the importance of follow-up professional development to build upon the teachers' initial success. "We've seen a change in the culture of the school and in the way personnel work together," she said. "They worked very hard, and we are really impressed."

McREL

Initial guidance and hands-on expertise delivered by McREL are followed by professional development to build upon teachers' initial success.

CRITICAL INFORMATION HELPS CALIFORNIA EDUCATORS IMPLEMENT CLASS SIZE REDUCTION LEGISLATION.

When the state legislature passed California's landmark class size reduction bill in July 1996, it quickly became the state's central education issue. Schools embarked on a frenzy of activity to hire additional teachers and find extra classroom space, and policymakers and parents questioned whether smaller class size is clearly linked with higher achievement.

Responding to calls for help, WestEd set out to clarify the reform and provide relevant research to practitioners through multiple communication strategies. Working closely with urban superintendents, the Laboratory created a "hot topic" paper laying out key issues facing superintendents and principals throughout the state. Dissemination efforts included promotion in the *R&D Watch*, the newspaper of the Association of California School Administrators, and in publications of EdSource and the California Teachers' Association. Realizing that the issues were rapidly evolving, the print document was followed with monthly electronic updates issued to a listserv and distributed via e-mail and fax.

WestEd also created something experts say is much needed but generally lacking in American education: a statewide consortium of agencies—RAND, the American Institutes for Research, Policy Analysis for California Education, WestEd, and EdSource—that have come together to comprehensively evaluate this major education reform. The consortium has collaborated with school districts from around the state, as well as all the major associations (school administrators, school boards, PTA, and teacher unions), to develop a research design that will: (1) examine how this initiative plays out in California schools through a short-term implementation study, followed by a longitudinal evaluation that aims to shape as well as analyze the reform, and (2) provide a class size reduction information clearinghouse for policymakers, practitioners, and the public. As findings emerge from the evaluation, the clearinghouse will tailor them into documents for specific audiences in a timely manner and make them widely available by building on the listserv and Web mechanisms already in place. Print versions will be mailed as well, using the combined outreach channels of the participating agencies.

In late 1997, the wealth of information accumulated on the class size reduction Web site was used by the U.S. Office of Educational Research and Improvement to help inform the White House about the issues. After President Clinton mapped out a class size reduction plan in his 1998 State of the Union speech, and Congress began debating authorizing legislation, reform proposals also surged in states. The many questions received from federal, state, and other agencies, as well as from the press, prompted a collaboration with two other Laboratories on a reform policy brief to be called *Class Size Reduction: Lessons Learned from Experience*.

Besides responding to a range of individual requests for information, WestEd presented both a general overview of class size reduction in California and findings from the WestEd/PACE preliminary study at the 1998 national conference of the Education Writers Association. Also planned are a briefing for key members of Congress and a national forum for policymakers.

WestEd

WestEd's multiple dissemination approach includes "hot topic" publications, a Web site, a statewide consortium, an information clearinghouse, and briefings.

EACH LABORATORY PROVIDES NATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN ITS SPECIALTY AREA.

Appalachia Educational Laboratory
Rural Education
AEL's rural education specialty promotes the integrity of rural, small schools in a global economy by focusing on the essential school-community relationship. Staff work regionally to help rural schools and communities improve school readiness, school-to-work opportunities, and academic achievement. Nationally, staff provide leadership, share expertise, establish partnerships, and inform debate. Two recently published resources focus on planning new school facilities and on ways educational service agencies can provide leadership and front line support to rural districts.
AEL contact: Dr. Hobart Harmon

Laboratory for Student Success
Urban Education
LSS developed the Urban Education Enhancement Program to address the multifold problems faced by children and their families who live in inner-city communities. The program focuses on providing coherent and caring learning environments that link the school with the family and the community in efforts to achieve student success. The program: (1) fosters collaborative programs of field-based development and applied research to build the capacity of local schools and school districts, and (2) convenes national invitational conferences and discussion forums to address emerging issues and next steps in scaling up urban education reform.
LSS contact: Dr. JoAnn Manning

Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory
Curriculum, Learning, and Instruction
McREL's specialty area work focuses on infusing curriculum, learning, and instruction with high standards for all students. This work, which also addresses the needs of diverse populations and educational contexts, is broadly disseminated across the region and the nation. McREL concluded a study to identify content standards that the public views as essential elements of a K-12 education. A system has been developed to help teachers assess academic abilities of migrant, language minority, and mobile students in language arts, math, and science. In a variety of formats, McREL provides educators with high-quality professional development designed for increased student achievement.
McREL contact: Dr. Lou Cicchinelli

North Central Regional Educational Laboratory
Educational Technology
Helping educators use technology in ways that improve student learning is the purpose of NCREL's specialty area in educational technology. In 1997 NCREL completed identification of 15 critical questions being asked by teachers, policymakers, and others and began the research review necessary to draft responses. An inventory of training and professional development resources was begun in developing a technology curriculum that connects to the critical questions.
NCREL contact: Dr. Dennis Gooler

Northeast and Islands Regional Laboratory
Language and Cultural Diversity
The LAB at Brown University seeks to learn how schools can address the needs of students from a variety of cultural and language backgrounds. The LAB is investigating how standards implementation, portfolio assessment systems, math and science instructional practices, and school change and community involvement efforts affect these learners. In November 1997 the LAB hosted the Institute on Cultural and Linguistic Diversity: Problem Solving through Action Research, bringing together teachers and nationally recognized researchers. Action-research teams are exploring how best to teach diverse groups of learners.
LAB Contact: Charlene Heintz

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory
School Change Processes
Work in the school change process specialty area brings people and organizations together to improve the results of school improvement efforts. In collaboration with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University and the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, national forums were conducted on two key issues: lateral accountability and scaling up school reform. Annual school improvement conferences are conducted for those who assist schools in change efforts. A cross-Laboratory partnership is producing training and self-study materials to assist schools and bring student views into the center of school reform.
NWREL contact: Dr. Bob Blum

Pacific Resources for Education and Learning
Language and Cultural Diversity
PREL helps educators maximize indigenous, as well as English, language development and apply research-based solutions to practical problems associated with literacy development in the multilingual Pacific region, where in many areas, English is not the indigenous language.
PREL contact: Dr. Zoe Ann Brown

Southeastern Regional Vision for Education
Early Childhood Education
SERVEing Young Children's (SYC) purpose is to build national resource and referral networks, share successes through products, programs, and publications, and establish early childhood demonstration sites. In 1995 SYC's focus expanded from its previous effort in preschool-to-school transitions to include children from infancy through age five. The 1997 Early Childhood Policy Conference was a collaborative effort between SERVE and the National Center for Early Development and Learning, which convened state and district decisionmakers.
SERVE contact: Nancy Livesay

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory
Language and Cultural Diversity
SEDL's specialty work develops, field tests, and disseminates resources to schools and communities to help all students succeed. Work currently focuses on five areas: adapting comprehensive school reform models to meet the needs of language minority students; helping teachers understand cultural differences between themselves and their students, and modify their classroom practices to address these differences; increasing communication among educators along the Mexican-American border; examining a deliberative dialogue model to encourage the participation of people of color; and identifying and disseminating resources on Native education programs.
SEDL contact: Dr. Joan L. Buttram

WestEd
Assessment
The assessment specialty focuses on developing syntheses, products, and services on issues related to assessment and accountability for dissemination to practitioners and policymakers in the areas of school-to-work, teacher assessment, high-stakes assessment, and technical issues surrounding innovative assessments. Through WestEd leadership, the cross-Laboratory work group in assessment released two exemplary products: a Web site and database of best Laboratory-developed practices in assessment and accountability, and a revised toolkit filled with high-quality, hands-on resources for professional developers in classroom assessment.
WestEd contact: Dr. Stanley Rabinowitz

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The Regional Educational Laboratory Program is administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education.
This publication is based on work sponsored wholly or in part by the U.S. Department of Education under contract numbers RJ 96006001-96006901. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views of the department or any other agency of the U.S. government.

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